

## Friendship Heights Recreation Center Budget Tentatively Approved by County

By AUDREY DUTTON  
Gazette Staff Writer

Friendship Heights will get a new recreation center, nearly a decade in the works, next year.

Community leaders say the recreation center would supplement the multipurpose village center in the heart of the high-rise community, known for its upscale shopping and retired residents.

The Montgomery County Council tentatively approved a budget Friday that devotes \$572,100 to opening the Wisconsin Place Community Recreation Center, which the county has said it would operate. The council votes today on its final budget.

Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) said he hopes the county will follow through on expectations that it will run the center. Now under construction, it is being built as a public amenity by the developers of the Wisconsin Place multiplex on Wisconsin Avenue — 1 million square feet of offices, stores and apartments on eight acres at Wisconsin and Western avenues. The project won approval from plan-

ning commissioners about seven years ago, and community activists lobbied for county control of the center. Construction will cost \$7.5 million to \$8 million, said Steven Robins, attorney for the developers, New England Development, Archstone-Smith and Boston Properties.

"It's always a good thing when citizens get what they bargained for," Berliner said.

"I think it's one heck of a deal for the county," said Bob Cope, a nearby resident who pushed for the center as chairman of the Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights.

"There's a big interest for it because there are not a lot of facilities, especially for the kids" in the Chevy Chase area, Cope said.

The 21,000-square-foot Wisconsin Place center will have a gymnasium, an exercise area, offices, a small kitchen and multipurpose rooms, according to the plans. Its offerings will "in all likelihood" be a mix of drop-in activities and classes, social events such as retirement parties, programs for children, sports team practices and open-gym nights, said

Jeffrey A. Bourne, the county recreation department's community services chief.

An ad hoc group of residents and a developer representative canvassed Friendship Heights area residents for feedback on programming and schedules at the center. Bourne said a more permanent advisory group is likely to assemble as the center's opening date nears, projected for mid-2009.

The center might overlap in some ways with the much smaller Friendship Heights Village Center, where paid staff members arrange high-profile speakers and community events such as Taste of Friendship Heights.

"Our effort all along has been to make sure that there's not too much overlap or duplication in terms of program offerings," said Julian Mansfield, village manager. "My sense is it's a little bit more of an athletic use than what we do at our place."

Simply put, the Village Center is not a recreation center, and the county sorely needs more of those, Cope said.